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Friday, December 16, 2005

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Grand Rapids Press

Letters

December 16, 2005

Support struggling families

I'm so sick and tired of the grandstanding of some of our state politicians with regard to welfare reform prior to the '06 election.

We get the same old tired refrain of "blame the recipients!," instead of actually trying to end welfare as we know it by addressing the real problems of: making education equally accessible to all; actually doing something about the minimum wage, like (horror) making it a living wage; continuing with meaningful help for daycare and utility assistance, as well as health care.

Until such time as the economy recovers, unless we address these and other issues meaningfully, a time limit will only insure that working adults and their children are dropped. We may feel better about it, but how about those struggling families?

JOHN MITCHELL/Grand Rapids

Grand Rapids Press

Letters

December 16, 2005

Wrong on welfare

As a retired mental-health professional, I have been through several legislative overhauls of the state's welfare system. We have made good strides in ensuring that services go to those who really need help.

However, I do not accept state Rep.'s Jerry Kooiman's and Tom Pearce's implication that nothing has been done "to break the cycle of dependence ("More welfare accountability," Press, Dec. 9)."

These must be representatives who are recent to our Legislature and who are not students of previous legislative actions when notorious cuts were made in the Michigan welfare services. Unfortunately, education and job training services to those who are not employable out of high school or GED programs were also cut and have been less available over the years. If anything, those limited services have been cut just as all other human-service programs have been cut!

Legislators cannot have everything they want. They can't cut programs and services and expect to have more people become employable when they need programs and services to accomplish job skills. Legislators need to get their heads out of the sand and learn some historical perspective on welfare reform in Michigan and how it has hurt rehabilitative services for those who wish to leave the welfare system.

CAROL LARIMER/Big Rapids

Jersey Child Welfare System Is Missing Its Own Targets

By TINA KELLEY and RICHARD LEZIN JONES

Published: December 16, 2005

At the New Jersey Child Abuse Research Education Service Institute in Stratford, demand for the new checkups has been less than expected. But at another clinic, there is a two-month wait.

When officials asked how such neglect could have been prevented, one suggestion seemed simple: regular medical visits. The state made prompt checkups for children entering foster care a cornerstone of its court-ordered overhaul, requiring that children who were removed from their homes have a comprehensive medical examination within 30 days.

But more than 18 months into the state's child welfare reform effort, and more than a year after these exams were required, New Jersey officials are failing to provide those medical checks to about 80 percent of eligible children, despite spending hundreds of thousands of dollars in additional state money for health care.

The difficulties that New Jersey has had in providing the promised medical exams offer a glimpse into some of the obstacles that the state has faced in trying to repair its child welfare system.

State and medical officials said that staff shortages, a delay in financing and poor communication between caseworkers and foster parents had hampered the state's efforts to offer the exams.

Fewer clinics than expected volunteered to give the time-consuming and expensive exams. In part, that was because additional state money was not initially offered to them, and in part because medical experts in child abuse are scarce.

At some of the seven clinics around the state conducting the exams, doctors say that the state has sent them a fraction of the patients they could see; others complain that they are overburdened and weeks behind schedule in conducting the checkups.

One clinic complained of a cancellation rate as high as 50 percent because of confusion among foster families and caseworkers about appointments. And doctors say that caseworkers still do not receive consistent training about the need for the exams, with some never having heard of them.

As a result, hundreds of children who should be evaluated under the state's new medical standard are not being seen. A study by the state's child advocate, to be released in the next few days, found that of the approximately 5,500 children placed in foster care by the state this year, fewer than 20 percent received the medical and mental health assessments called for in the reform plan.

Almost two out of three of the medical problems discovered in exams did not get follow-up treatment, according to one sampling, including diagnoses of psychiatric problems, asthma, anemia and speech delays. Kevin M. Ryan, the state's child advocate, said the state's slow response might be putting children at risk.

"The starvation and medical neglect of the Jackson boys should have put to rest any doubt that we need to build a statewide health care system for foster children," he said. "We uncovered their plight more than two years ago, so the time lag is incredibly frustrating."

New Jersey has committed more than \$320 million during the past two years to improve its child welfare system, following a plan state officials helped create to settle a class-action lawsuit filed by Children's Rights Inc., an advocacy group based in Manhattan.

Yet lawyers representing foster children in the suit found that so little progress had been made that they filed a request with a federal judge this month calling for an emergency takeover of the system and for Jon S. Corzine, the governor-elect, to be put in charge of fixing it.

The state defends how it has spent its money, but says that the timetable - one that the state had agreed to - has been too ambitious. The panel monitoring the state's progress in the overhaul has said it would be willing to adjust the deadline for meeting the new medical standards if the state demonstrated sufficient progress in meeting them or offered a reasonable explanation for why a delay was necessary.

To be sure, the state has made improvements in the past two years, hiring more than 1,000 new caseworkers and removing more than 100 mentally ill children from juvenile detention centers, where they had been illegally held because the state had nowhere else to put them.

But the state has spent all the money allocated for some improvements, such as more visits by caseworkers, while failing to make the targeted number of visits. It has also struggled with starting up a staff training academy and introducing a computer system to help better track children; the computer system, first scheduled for completion in March 2006, is now expected to be in use by November 2007.

However, of the state's shortcomings, its failure to put comprehensive medical checkups in place is among the most potentially dangerous, officials say.

"Nothing is more fundamental to kids' well-being than their getting good health care," said Steve Cohen, a member of the monitoring panel. "We see the state is really unable to assure good medical care for kids for whom it has taken custody."

The state, under its court-ordered reform plan, agreed that as of Dec. 31, 98 percent of children would get the new medical exams within the first month of entering foster care.

Last week, Human Services Commissioner James M. Davy testified before the New Jersey Assembly's budget committee that the system would miss that deadline.

He also conceded that there were serious concerns about putting the exams in place. "I'll be honest with you, we're having some problems with the way that it is working," Mr. Davy told lawmakers.

So far, state officials say, slightly fewer than 1,000 children have received the exam out of more than 5,500 who have been eligible since they began last year. Child welfare officials said that number is skewed slightly by children who are in the system for fewer than 30 days and not subject to the requirement, although they did not provide an estimate on how many children fit into that category.

Mr. Davy has offered no estimate of when the state might be able to meet the court-ordered standard. At the same time, there are no plans to expand the exams to include children already in the state's care.

The exams are the middle tier of the state's ambitious three-part plan to improve health care for children. Children who are removed from their homes receive a preplacement exam immediately. Then there is the more detailed new exam, called the Comprehensive Health Evaluations for Children, or CHEC. Finally, before children move within the system, for example from one foster home to another, they are required to get a third health screening.

But the exam program, which few other states have tried and which a national advocate called commendable for including mental health issues, has struggled from its inception, in part because it was so ambitious. The exams last up to four hours and involve childhood mental health experts, who are scarce and notoriously overbooked.

"One could have thought of this as a pilot program," said Dr. Joseph J. Jacobs, the medical director for New Jersey's child welfare agency, the Division of Youth and Family Services. "We kind of jumped to a full-blown, statewide program."

Only seven sites agreed to provide the exams, which cost as much as \$1,100; Medicaid reimburses them for only \$670 of that.

While Dr. Jacobs said clinics had not complained about the amount of the reimbursement, he said, "the lack of additional funding to hire more staff up front may have been a barrier."

Once most of the clinics were running, the state agreed to give four of them an additional \$130,000 to help cover costs. Now state officials plan to budget that amount for each of 15 clinics next year, with the goal of accommodating every eligible child, Dr. Jacobs said.

The state, however, had limited control over where the clinics were located.

The clinics that volunteered to do the exams were not all located close to the areas with the largest number of children entering foster care, causing some to be overbooked and others to be underused. The system also relies on the local child welfare office to refer children efficiently, which does not always happen.

One place that offers such exams, the New Jersey Child Abuse Research Education Service Institute, at the Stratford campus of the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey, and serving a region that includes impoverished Camden, is falling far short of the 600 examinations it is prepared to conduct yearly. In anticipation of the demand, it took additional office space and hired a doctor, a nurse practitioner and several part-time psychologists, said its director, Martin A. Finkel.

By the end of October, the state had referred just 222 patients to the clinic, Dr. Finkel said.

He said that another clinic in Hackensack was prepared to provide a similar number of exams but had so far received only 179 patients.

At the same time, Dr. Jacobs said, some of the five other sites are "absolutely inundated with referrals." One of those is the Jersey Shore Medical Center in Neptune, where Dr. Steven W. Kairys said that there is about a two-month wait for exams.

Dr. Kairys, who supervises the CHEC program at the Neptune clinic, said that the center could use more staff members, although it recently used grant money to hire an extra nurse and a psychologist to help with the exams. The volume of cases that the center sees is so great, he said, that ideally two additional sites are needed.

Because of the backlog, Dr. Kairys said, his office has seen only about 140 of the 700 children in Monmouth and Ocean Counties who have entered the child welfare system since the center started performing the exams six months ago.

"These are some of the most vulnerable and most damaged children in the state," Dr. Kairys said.

"So having them evaluated to catch up with them soon after they come into the state's eye is crucial."

Dr. Jacobs said that some children taken from homes in one county might have been placed with foster families in another county, which would skew calculations about how many exams needed to be done in each. The state has worked to find clinics to provide exams near where there are backlogs.

Compounding the problem, Dr. Kairys said, is poor communication between social workers and foster parents. The foster parents often take the children to the visits, although it is the state's responsibility to ensure that the exams take place. As a result, about half the time, appointments are canceled or the children simply fail to show up, he said.

Dr. Finkel said caseworkers are also not clear about the rules. Because of all the new employees, and the delays in training them, many new caseworkers are young, inexperienced and overwhelmed.

"There are all these mandates for caseworkers, but they don't know which ones to do first," he said. "There are caseworkers who haven't even heard of the CHEC program."

Some of the clinics said they could use more help, but hiring doctors who are experts in child abuse issues can take up to a year, as there are fewer than 100 who do such work full time in the country, Dr. Finkel said.

Mr. Ryan, the child advocate, remained hopeful that the system of providing care to foster children can be fixed. "This is about keeping our kids safe," he said. "We need to bring the right people together and get this done."

Store's alert leads to porn charges

Friday, December 16, 2005

By Nate Reens
The Grand Rapids Press

GRAND RAPIDS -- The father of a Grand Rapids man accused of child pornography says police have yet to prove that a nude image on his son's digital camera is that of a girl younger than 18. Kent County sheriff's detectives arrested Jerred Parris III last week on a parole violation and on Thursday charged the 35-year-old with two pornography-related felonies. If convicted, he faces 20 years in prison.

Parris' father, who lives in Mecosta County, said police interviewed family members to try to figure out the age of the girl and how her picture was taken. Investigators said multiple images were obtained as evidence.

The elder Parris does not know what to think of the allegations that could land his son in prison for a third time.

"Don't get me wrong, I love my boy," he said. "But, if this is true, he's sick and he needs help." Jerred Parris III faces counts of engaging in sexually abusive activities and possessing sexually abusive materials.

Police were alerted to Parris by employees at Sam's Club on Alpine Avenue NW, where he allegedly tried to develop or enlarge photos.

Store clerks informed police, launching a probe that has authorities checking to see whether the images are of local victims, Kent County Sheriff's Sgt. Roger Parent said.

"We don't know if there are any true local victims or not at this point," he said.

Parent said a search warrant at Parris' Northeast Side home found "a large quantity of inappropriate materials." Police would not detail what those items were, but they did seize a computer, Parent said.

Some images Parris allegedly tried to have developed at Sam's Club were grainy and could be from the Internet. Others were clear and appeared as if they were taken by the suspect, Parent said. Police would not say how old potential victims appeared.

Parris was arrested at his grandmother's house Dec. 6. She said the charges came as a surprise.

"I never suspected anything like this," Jane Parris said.

Girls forced into prostitution ring

Local complaint came from Scio truck stop

Friday, December 16, 2005

BY AMALIE NASH

Ann Arbor News Staff Reporter

Federal authorities say two underage girls were held captive over the course of two weeks last spring and driven from Toledo to a truck stop in Scio Township, where they were forced into prostitution.

Four people were indicted this week in the case, and three were ordered to remain in custody during a detention hearing Thursday. The fourth person remains at large. They are charged with conspiracy, two counts of sexual trafficking of children, one count of interstate transportation of minors for prostitution and one count of transportation of minors for prostitution.

Federal documents allege that the two girls involved in the Washtenaw County case, who were 14 and 15 at the time, were beaten and threatened with violence, ordered to call one of the men "Daddy," and forced into prostitution under the watch of two older prostitutes.

Among the people charged in the case are Deric Willoughby, 40, Jennifer Huskey, 24, and Brandi Shope, 19, who were all arrested in Toledo on Tuesday. Richard Gordon, the fourth suspect, has not been arrested.

"There seems to be a national network of people who have imprisoned underage women," FBI Senior Agent Greg Stejskal of the Ann Arbor office said. "I believe the problem is substantially larger than it was first perceived to be, and there are additional resources being dedicated to the initiative."

The local case came to light after the Washtenaw County Sheriff's Department received a complaint of prostitution at the TA Truck Stop in Scio Township May 23. Sheriff's deputies found Gordon, Huskey and one of the girls in a truck at the stop, but did not observe any prostitution, Sheriff's Cmdr. Dave Egeler said.

Huskey, who has multiple previous prostitution arrests, and Gordon were released after an interview with deputies, but the girl appeared to be underage, so deputies continued talking to her, Egeler said. She initially provided a fake name and date of birth, but eventually revealed she was a runaway from Toledo who had been forced to perform a sex act on Gordon for \$100, police said.

The other girl had already been taken back to Toledo, and authorities said that her father attempted to rescue her May 23, and Willoughby caused her to fall from a second-story window. During interviews with an FBI agent, the girls said they met Willoughby and Shope on May 13, and went to their Toledo residence, but when they tried to leave, Willoughby locked the door, according to an affidavit in the case. They said Shope and Huskey informed them that they would have to engage in sexual acts for money, and they were instructed to follow Willoughby's directions or face physical harm.

One girl said she was forced to perform five sex acts for money, and the other girl said she was forced to perform seven, documents said. The girls said the older women stayed with them and collected the money, which was given to Willoughby.

58 families finish adoption process as court clears docket

Friday, December 16, 2005

By Matt Vande Bunte
The Grand Rapids Press

GRAND RAPIDS -- Randy Schuch was "too nervous" to speak. His wife, Angel, cried. Then, after their new 18-month-old son banged the gavel three times, they were all smiles. "To us, it just means completeness," adoptive mother Angel Schuch said. "We're a true family now. It just feels different now that it's official."

Zachary Yong Schuch has lived with the Lowell-area couple since January. On Thursday, at the Kent County Courthouse, he became a certified member of the family.

The South Korean-born boy was one of 77 children signed over to 58 families during the ninth annual Adoption Day in the family division of Kent County Circuit Court. Judges cleared their dockets to complete a steady stream of adoption confirmations.

The day was a change of pace for a court that routinely sees cases of neglect, abuse and other inhumane treatment of children, Judge Kathleen Feeney said.

"In these courtrooms, we do a lot of not-fun things," said Feeney, wearing a red Santa hat.

"Everything kind of comes full circle, because you see these kids in loving homes and they're thriving.

"It's like a high that lasts all day. It lasts the whole year long."

After brief hearings, families visited Santa Claus and enjoyed refreshments provided by the Adoptive Family Support Network. The adopted children each received a teddy bear from Hug-A-Bear.

Sarah Zuidema, a social worker with Bethany Christian Services, said Adoption Day is a high point of her profession. The hoopla provides a fitting climax to the adoption process, both for her and clients.

"I think it's so meaningful for the parents," she said. "They've been through so much to get to this point.

"It's the best day of the year for me."

For the Schuch family and dozens of others, it was a day filled with overwhelming emotion.

"He's been a blessing and a gift from God," Angel Schuch said of her son. "He's been a joy."

Blaze traced to curtains

December 15, 2005

By STEVE BROWNLEE, Journal Staff Writer

MARQUETTE - Four minutes of confusion may have been all it took for a fire in a room to become a disaster that routed more than 100 residents and possibly killed two of them at the Mather Nursing Center.

The Michigan State Police fire investigator in Marquette says he has determined the origin of the fire and revealed a set of three calls between the Ishpeming Township nursing center and Central Dispatch placed in a span of four minutes early Monday morning.

The fire originated on the curtains in Room 311 at Mather, state police Detective Sgt. Jeff Hubbard has concluded.

"The report from employees at Mather that they saw curtains and the area around the window in flames are consistent with what we have found so far," he said, adding that numerous witnesses were interviewed about the incident.

He also said the investigation is not finished, and more about the fire's origin may be discovered as forensic testing continues.

"Why it started I can't tell you," Hubbard said this morning. "I don't know if we're ever going to know that."

Hubbard also couldn't say whether the fire was an accident or arson.

"It is unclear at this time whether the curtains were set on fire intentionally or accidentally," Hubbard told the Associated Press.

He did outline a set of three calls between Mather and the 911 center starting shortly after midnight Monday.

At 12:10 a.m., a call was placed from Room 311 to the 911 switchboard, apparently by a Mather resident. However, between the softness of the voice and mumbling sound of the talking, the dispatcher couldn't understand what was being said. After a brief time, the caller hung up.

"I've listened to the tape and I'm not even sure if it was a man or woman who made that call," Hubbard said.

Caller ID indicated the call originated from Room 311 at Mather; at 12:12 a.m. the dispatcher called the nursing facility and an employee said someone had just come from that room and that there was no problem there.

At 12:14 a.m., a Mather employee called 911 to report the fire.

In the fire's aftermath, all 108 residents of the Mather facility were evacuated to the Ishpeming Township Hall for evaluation, then depending on their condition, were transported to emergency rooms at Bell Hospital in Ishpeming and Marquette General Hospital in Marquette, or to shelters at Westwood High School in Ishpeming Township and Beacon House in Marquette.

Two residents died in the aftermath, Margaret M. Sarasien, 87, of Marquette and Harry H. Mattice, 79, of Negaunee. They lived across the hall from each other, two doors down from Room 311, according to an Associated Press report.

Three Mather residents remain at MGH, waiting for placement and are expected to be discharged today, according to hospital spokesman Jim LaJoie.

Bell spokesman Rich Rossway said three patients were discharged Wednesday and four remain hospitalized, all in stable condition.

Letters to the editor

Don't weaken health programs for elderly

December 16, 2005
The Detroit Free Press

Congress is facing a critical decision about funding for Geriatric Education Centers (GECs) and programs providing financial support for young faculty members in academic institutions who wish to hone their skills in geriatric medicine, dentistry and behavioral and mental health.

GECs focus on health-care professionals already in practice through a variety of outreach training programs.

The Geriatric Education Center of Michigan, which is based at Michigan State University and is a collaboration between MSU's colleges of Human Medicine and Osteopathic Medicine, draws its strength from the members of its consortium: Wayne State University's Institute of Gerontology, Central Michigan University, Grand Valley State University, Alma College, the Michigan Primary Care Association and the Michigan Dementia Coalition.

The consortium provides multidisciplinary training for physicians, nurse practitioners, physician assistants, nurses, social workers, rehabilitation therapists and others in community health centers, community-based outreach clinics for veterans, rural health centers, clinics serving American Indians, nursing facilities and organizations serving Michigan's older adults.

All 50 of the GECs across the country are now being funded with a total of \$31.5 million. Nationwide, these centers have provided training for more than 425,000 health-care professionals, including 37,000 located in rural and underserved areas, and created more than 1,000 educational materials on aging.

The U.S. House of Representatives' proposal for the fiscal year 2006 budget would eliminate all support for the centers. The Senate version preserves \$29.5 million.

If funding for these programs is eliminated or significantly reduced, the ability of the health care workforce to meet the needs of the growing number of Americans over age 65 will be compromised severely. The workforce will not get essential training in the care for our nation's elderly.

Congress must make the right decision about good geriatric health care for millions of older Americans for now, and for decades to come.

Larry Lawhorne, MD

Director

Geriatric Education Center of Michigan

Professor of family practice at Michigan State University

Care center evacuated

Friday, December 16, 2005

The Grand Rapids Press

WAYLAND -- The midmorning routine of tenants and staff at Country Liv-Inn, 110 North Forrest St., was interrupted Thursday by a gas leak. Falling ice from the roof of the residence behind the adult care home struck its gas meter, breaking it and causing gas to spill into the facility, Wayland Police Chief Dan Miller said. "Staff heard the noise and called 911 when they smelled gas." Nine people were evacuated, including six facility residents who were moved by ambulance to the Public Safety Building. No one was injured, and the residents returned about an hour later.

Santa Girls: Company's anniversary fun includes holiday giving

Friday, December 16, 2005

By Rick Wilson
The Grand Rapids Press

In celebrating their company's 50th anniversary this year, Shirley and Jim Balk have been giving their employees 50 of this and 50 of that each month.

Gifts have included some pretty cool stuff, such as 50 crisp \$1 bills and \$50 worth of restaurant and movie coupons. In return, the couple asked employees at Hansen-Balk Steel Treating Co. in Grand Rapids to turn their generosity toward West Michigan, prompting 16 workers to volunteer as drivers for the Santa Claus Girls annual gift delivery Saturday.

"He wanted us as employees to give something back to the community, so as a group a lot of them decided it would be fun to deliver presents," the couple's son, Steve Balk, vice president of operations, said of his father. "He's the kind of guy who's served lunch at God's Kitchen and been involved with just about anything that involves helping people.

"The Santa Claus Girls has always been a favorite of his because it's local," he added. "It's people with a true need, and when you give something it stays in the community."

Shirley Balk said the company also plans a donation to the Press-sponsored charity, which delivers gifts to thousands of Kent County children each year.

Santa Claus Girls President Barbara Bowe said the 350 drivers expected to deliver gifts Saturday are a key element in the annual gift-giving.

DAVID CRUMM: Doing godly work

Hindu couple's gift helps fund church soup kitchens

December 16, 2005

BY DAVID CRUMM

FREE PRESS COLUMNIST

The best holiday stories involve surprises and gifts. This is a story about a local town where hundreds of lives are changing because of unexpected generosity.

Monroe is one of Michigan's oldest cities. Blue-collar Catholic and Protestant families have long histories there. I spotted three generations of a family -- a grandmother, daughter and grandchildren -- as I walked into one of Monroe's new soup kitchens Tuesday night.

I was warmly welcomed, though this family and several others among the 100 men, women and children eating at banquet tables asked me not to use their names. In a proud little town like Monroe, no one wants neighbors to know they've fallen on hard times.

"I've lived here all my life, and when we first started looking into the need for feeding programs earlier this year, I was surprised by how many hungry people there are," Jeff Weaver said as he scurried around the kitchen of St. Paul United Methodist Church in Monroe. While telling me his story, he was supervising the preparation of a dinner of roast pork, hot vegetables, breads, salads and pies.

Earlier this year, Weaver and a few friends formed a nonprofit called God Works and tried to convince local churches to ensure that a soup kitchen would be open every night of the week in Monroe. If churches would open their kitchens, God Works promised to find volunteers and money.

Weaver found that two local churches already were providing free dinners each week: Presbyterians covered Thursdays and Lutherans covered Sundays. By October, Weaver had lined up his Methodist church to cover Tuesday nights. But, for all his efforts, less than half of the days of the week were covered.

That's when he got a call from Dr. Manhar Tejura, a local cardiologist, and his wife, Sandhya, who offered a stunning contribution. Neither Weaver nor the Tejuras will disclose the amount, but earlier this month, their donation started funding a full year of once-a-week dinners at yet another location, a Wesleyan church in Monroe.

The Tejuras have become major God Works fund-raisers and say that, soon, they expect other professionals in Monroe to help them ensure meals are served on the remaining three nights of the week.

After dinner was served Tuesday night, the Tejuras joined Weaver to talk about the effort.

Weaver, who owns a small computer-programming firm, said he still knows little about Hinduism, the Tejuras' faith, "but then I'm not much for sitting around talking about God's work. I prefer just doing the work," he said.

When he first met the Tejuras, Indian Americans who have lived in Monroe for 20 years, he realized that their involvement suddenly would expand his Christian program into an interfaith effort. But Weaver barely discussed the issue with them.

He didn't think of them as Hindus. He just saw helpers.

For his part, Manhar Tejura said, his family wasn't trying to make a religious statement. "We simply wanted to help our community," he said.

However, as we began talking about the Tejuras' faith, I showed Weaver a passage I brought along from the Ramayana, an ancient Hindu poem. The verses tell of a great banquet ordered by Lord Rama, a Hindu

deity, in wording that is almost identical to famous passages from the Book of Isaiah in the Bible that lie at the core of the God Works mission.

In Rama's feast, the neediest were served first. The poem says, "Rice went to the helpless widow. And to the orphan, gifts of gold. Gifts they gave to saintly teachers; shelter to the weak and old. ... Ancient sages had not witnessed a feast like this in any land. The gods in all their wondrous bounty had never blessed with kinder hand."

Weaver nodded as he finished reading the poem. "It's like the passage from Isaiah," he said.

"Yes," Manhar Tejura said. "Concern for the poor is many centuries old in Indian society."

Then, I think it's fair to say that the Tejuras offered yet another gift in the midst of our conversation -- a lesson they articulated about the true meaning of community.

"The bottom line here is that a community must work together to help the needy, regardless of creed or color or origin," Manhar Tejura said. "What makes us a community is finding that we already share values and then working together on those values."

Sandhya Tejura added, "It is true that people are more aware of the need to help at holiday times. But wouldn't it be better if we all agreed that these needs should be satisfied throughout the whole year?"

How you can help

Many nonprofits and other organizations in the Detroit area need volunteers. Here are three places to call if you wish to donate your skills and time:

Like hundreds of other charitable nonprofits in Michigan, Monroe-based God Works -- profiled in today's Our Spirit column -- is a small program focused on local needs. Its governing board is made up of volunteers, donors and clergy. There is no paid staff, but the group's Internet site gives updates and contact information at www.godworks.info.

Volunteer Impact is an all-volunteer agency based in West Bloomfield that works to link the needs of nonprofits with those who wish to volunteer. Check the Web site at www.volunteerimpact.org or call 248-932-2580 or 248 559-4950.

The United Way for Southeastern Michigan has just launched a multilingual information and referral service that connects people to health and human services, as well as volunteer opportunities, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. In Macomb, Oakland or Wayne counties, dial 2-1-1. Outside

Making dreams come true Salvation Army, Marine Corps League ensure that kids get toys

Friday, December 16, 2005

BY STEPHENIE KOEHN
Ann Arbor News Staff Reporter

Visions of sugarplums - or more likely, dolls, baseball gloves and video games - are dancing in the heads of children throughout the county as Christmas approaches.

But for some, whose dreams might be beyond their parents' financial reach, the Livingston County Salvation Army offers a bit of seasonal help.

Parents who live in the county and meet income guidelines can pick out their children's presents from a mountain of donated toys at the Livingston County Salvation Army's annual Toy Store. Distribution day is Saturday. The program, for children whose families have not been adopted through the Salvation Army's well-known Adopt-A-Family program, is located for the second year in a storefront at the Tanger Outlet Mall in Howell Township.

A crew of 25 volunteer "elves" will finish stocking the cavernous store tonight with more than 20,000 toys, said volunteer Dave Loar, who first organized the annual operation in 1993.

Awaiting this year's distribution, a gaggle of Barbie dolls shares the jammed shelves and tables with piggy banks, toy cars and trucks, more dolls, books, games, blocks, sports equipment, electronic keyboards, purses, toy tools, radios, chemistry sets, even a bicycle - nearly any kind of toy that a kid might want.

The vast majority of the toys were donated by area residents to the Marine Corps League's Toys for Tots program, which always has received strong support in Livingston County, Loar said.

"They do the collection and we do the distribution for them," he said. Some toys also are donated by area churches, individuals and other civic groups, he added.

Gary Dunn, coordinator of the Marine Corps League's Toys for Tots program in Livingston County, said the League is appreciative of the assistance of the Salvation Army in distributing the toys. "We collected 21,600 toys last year in Livingston County and serviced 1,150 children. We're very appreciative of what they do. They do a lot of work."

In past years, the parents selected toys for their children (children do not accompany parents, so that the Santa factor and the element of surprise aren't lost). But increasing demand means that this year, to save time, the small army of elves will select the toys, which are sorted by age, sex and category. Each child will get a minimum of 12 items, Loar said. There is no limit on books, he said. "They can take as many as they want until we run out - and sometimes the Marine Corps League buys more to keep the supply up."

This year at least 1,500 children from low-income families will get toys for Christmas, thanks to the day-long distribution operation. "We'll be putting in 12 hours Saturday," said Loar, who counts 11 of his family members among the elves.

Dave's daughter, Chris Walblay, who has been helping him with the operation for about 12 years, said she will be there, wearing her elf hat, for the distribution.

"I was in my early 20's when I started," she said. "Now, I bring my three kids. One year my son said, 'Mom, I like to do this because, without it, they wouldn't have a Christmas.' We can't help financially, but we can offer our time."

The heart of the toy distribution is donations - of toys, time and other assistance, Loar said.

"Kim Dane and the Tanger Outlet Mall were our saviors this year," he said. "This is the second year that they have provided a facility for us to distribute from. They are even paying the light and heat on this space. Kim Dane (manager of the outlet center) is a knight on a white horse."

Even though the distribution is Saturday, Loar said, donations will be accepted right through Christmas. "We always have some who come in after the regular distribution is over," said Carol Deaton, of Howell, who has been a volunteer since the toy store program began.

Deaton said Loar is the "heart" of the program.

"When someone comes in and says, 'It's Christmas Eve and I don't have anything for my kids,' Dave's usually here doing something about it. He has a big, caring heart."

Reach Stephenie Koehn at skoehn@livingstoncommunitynews.com or at (810) 844-2008.

Schavey fund gives \$30K

December 16, 2005

By VANESSA McCRAY
Record-Eagle staff writer

TRAVERSE CITY - A community fund continued its grant-making effort, giving out more than \$30,000 this year.

The Denny Schavey Memorial Community Service Fund is named for a former United Way of Northwest Michigan union liaison. Denny Schavey died in a motorcycle accident in 2003, weeks after the United Way cut his position.

Labor leaders founded the Schavey fund as an alternative to the United Way to fund local charities.

"They've advertised us for a long time as being the union's response, but the truth of the matter (is) it's become the community's response," said Roger Adkins, who helped start the fund.

About \$21,000 of the grant money awarded this year comes from a United Way payment to settle a legal dispute with the Traverse Bay Area Central Labor Council over Schavey's termination.

This year's grant recipients include more than a dozen organizations that received donations ranging from \$4,000 to \$600. Most of the grants are made to the agencies for "unrestricted" use. Adkins said many nonprofits need money to run the office and pay utility bills - administrative costs for which other grants won't pick up the tab.

Legal Services of Northern Michigan, a first-time Schavey grant recipient, will use its \$600 to help pay for a new phone system. Deputy director Mary Kavanaugh-Gahn said the agency provided free legal service to 4,400 clients in 36 counties last year.

Kavanaugh-Gahn said the new phone system will allow clients to connect to other programs and resources. She said her agency struggles to meet the demand for its services.

"If we had enough money we could hire six more people for the Traverse City office," she said. Other grants will go to agencies that include: Catholic Human Services, Child and Family Services, Girl Scouts of Crooked Tree, Salvation Army, Scenic Trails Council of Boy Scouts, among others.

December 16, 2005

Local giving trees grow goodwill

Alicia Holmes - aholmes@dailypress.net

ESCANABA - Area residents not only give Christmas gifts to people they know - they also give presents to strangers. The ornaments on local "angel trees" or "giving trees" are more than decorative. Each one represents a gift needed by someone in the area who, were it not for these trees, would go without on Christmas.

"I'd hate to think of anyone going through Christmas without getting at least one gift, one act of kindness," said Judy Schroeder, assistant at the Escanaba Downtown Development Authority. The DDA office on Ludington Street in Escanaba is site of a Salvation Army angel tree. "That's what Christmas is about."

Several Escanaba angel trees collect gifts to be distributed by the Salvation Army, including one at Bay College. Residents select an ornament, buy the gift, and bring it back to the tree. This year so many residents participated that the DDA tree was emptied of ornaments and had to be filled up again, Schroeder said. However, Maj. Bill Cox, Salvation Army, said overall area angel-tree donations to the Army this year are down.

Christ the King Lutheran Church had a small giving tree to benefit Bay Pines Juvenile Detention Center. Each ornament featured the name of a youth and each child's wish list of "needs and wants," said Rev. Peter Andersen. Churchgoers embraced the project, Andersen said. All ornaments were taken, with gifts provided for about 20 youths.

Santa's helpers make a delivery to Salvation Army

By Christy Strawser

Daily Tribune Staff Writer

PUBLISHED: December 16, 2005

ROYAL OAK — A woman with neatly combed salt and pepper hair tapped her cane rhythmically down a hallway to the registration desk in the Salvation Army's Toy Shop.

The clicking stopped when she sat to sign her name on a certificate for free food and warm clothes Thursday, the first day of the Army's annual gift giveaway.

Tears coursed down her face. Her chin quivered as she mouthed two words to staffer Cristina Gallop before setting off with a volunteer and a shopping cart.

"Thank you," she whispered, her head hung low.

If rooms have a mood, this one was schizophrenic. While one woman shopped in silence with tears of shame or gratitude running down her cheeks, another bounced with glee, going from table to table picking toys, socks, clothes and board games for her family.

"I'm very happy to be here," said Mel Taylor, who came Thursday with her sister, car pooling to the Salvation Army Citadel from their homes in Hazel Park and Ferndale.

The sisters left home early to be sure heavy snow and an unreliable car didn't prevent them from putting presents under their Christmas trees.

Taylor kept her smile as she shopped for her five kids and found treasures on tables heaped with presents donated to the Toy Shop. There were new coats, socks, dress clothes, CDs, DVDs, Cabbage patch dolls, toy cars and other presents piled high.

About 1,300 clients are expected to visit the Army in the next week and collect what they need to convince their families Santa Claus remembered them.

"I wouldn't have been able to buy my kids anything without this," said Taylor, who attends Oakland Community College to earn a teaching degree and works part time. "There would be nothing for them."

Equally happy was Ella Rigins of Royal Oak Township who shopped for her three kids.

"This means a lot to my family," Rigins said. "Without it, I don't know what I would do, I really don't."

The Army makes its Toy Shop feel like a mall by providing shopping bags, carts and personal shopping assistants who match lists with

available toys, clothes and games.

Metro Detroit donors were so generous this year the Salvation Army gave every recipient several toys in addition to necessities like socks, hats and coats.

"They have such nice things here," said one mother who asked not to be named. "Some of us, it makes us feel terrible, like we can't provide for our families."

Erasing any bad feelings was the goal of Sharon and Bud Hunley of Sterling Heights, smiling seniors who spend at least two days every holiday season volunteering in the Toy Shop.

Hunley remembered fondly one of her first Toy Shop clients, a young woman who had nothing, but was standoffish and shy, barely saying a word as she picked toys and clothes for her kids.

The volunteer could sense how uncomfortable she was, so she told the woman there was one thing left on her list. "What?" she asked.

"I need a hug," Hunley told her and the woman embraced her, relaxing and smiling for the first time.

Now Hunley tells all her shoppers they owe her a hug and she said it instantly puts them on the right track.

"You feel like you know them by the end; you get close," Hunley said.

Her husband was so dedicated to his shoppers Thursday that he went to the car of one client who had seven kids and couldn't find a babysitter for her youngest.

No children are allowed in the Toy Shop, so the woman left her baby in the car with a friend, who had worked all night. She couldn't relax because she worried the friend would fall asleep.

Bud Hunley trudged through the snow-covered parking lot to check on the baby and came back to reassure the mother with a smile on his face.

"With all the bad stuff that's going on in the world, this is Christmas. This is what it should be about," Sharon Hunley said as her husband shook snow off his Santa hat.

Contact Christy Strawser at christy.strawser@dailytribune.com or 248-591-2569.

Police arrest 12-year-old for Internet threats to blow up her middle school

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By Mitch Hotts
Macomb Daily Staff Writer

A 12-year-old girl has been arrested and charged with terrorism after she was accused of making threats over the Internet to blow up her school with a bomb, according to prosecutors and police.

The Macomb County Prosecutor's Office on Thursday authorized a warrant charging the girl with using a computer to commit a threat of terrorism. The charge is a felony punishable by up to 20 years in prison upon conviction.

The seventh-grade student at Wyandot Middle School in Clinton Township will also face expulsion proceedings and will be permanently kicked out of school, officials said.

"The school children who received these threats were terrified," Macomb County Prosecutor Eric Smith said in a statement. "We can't tolerate that in our schools."

Wyandot School was under heavy security this week after some students at the school over the weekend received instant messages on the Internet from someone using the screen name "xxchemical2xx."

On Dec. 10 some of the students on their home computers received the message, which stated, "(T)his coming up Monday-Friday I am going to bomb Wyandot Middle School." The author also warned the students to stay away from school all week because, "I do care for you."

Clinton Township police, with the assistance of computer forensic experts, were able to trace the girl's computer address. On Wednesday police raided her home and she confessed to writing the messages. Investigators found no evidence that the girl possessed any explosives or weapons.

"Her mother has been very cooperative and wants to resolve this issue," said Detective Capt. Bruce Wade. "There was no motive or reason why she did this."

The girl, whose name has not been released, attended classes Monday and Tuesday where school authorities searched the backpacks of students after police used canine teams throughout the building to detect any explosives.

On Monday about 248 -- or 46 percent -- of the school's approximate 500 students did not attend classes.

Mark Deldin, superintendent of Chippewa Valley Schools, said he hopes the arrest and expulsion will send a clear message to students that the threats will be treated as a serious criminal matter regardless of the

student's age.

"I'm not a mind reader, I don't know if she was joking or not," Deldin said. "I know this may have started with innocent instant messaging but it turned out to be more serious. If I make a mistake, I'm going to err on the side of safety for our students."

Clinton Township Police Chief Al Ernst agreed.

"Years ago you had kids making bomb threats over the phone. Today you're seeing threats being made on the Internet by someone who thinks they may be anonymous, but they're not anonymous."

The school district has had previous experience with computer-based threats that contained a chilling amount of evidence to back up the threats.

Andrew Osantowski, a former Chippewa Valley High School student, was recently sentenced to four years in prison on terrorism charges for planning a Columbine-style attack at the high school on the Internet. In that case, police seized numerous explosive devices, weapons and Nazi memorabilia in his home.

Proposed Medicare cuts concern, frustrate doctors

FLINT

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By Shantell M. Kirkendollskir
kendoll@flintjournal.com • 810.766.6366

FLINT - Seniors might find it difficult to get a doctor if Medicare payments to physicians are cut next year, according to the president of the American Medical Association.

Dr. Edward Hill visited Flint this week while traveling the country spreading the message about the coming cuts, which take effect Jan. 1 if Congress does not act.

"We're quite concerned about access to care if we take away the backbone of the system - doctors," Hill said.

A federal formula will trigger a 4.6 percent cut in Medicare reimbursements. By the end of 2006, it means Michigan could lose \$109 million in federal health dollars.

More than that, Michigan's 1.5 million elderly - the eighth largest concentration of seniors in the country - could lose access to physicians. A survey of AMA doctors showed 38 percent would limit how many Medicare patients they take if their pay decreases.

Twenty-eight percent of family physicians already limit the number of Medicare patients they accept at their practice because of low pay, according to the AMA survey.

The cuts could be stopped, said Sen. Debbie Stabenow, D--Michigan, in the five working days left before Congress recesses for the year - if there's the political will to do so.

"Cutting costs to physicians, nurses and hospitals is not the way to (save Medicare dollars)," said Stabenow, who introduced a bill, along with Republican Sen. John Kyl of Arizona, maintaining doctor pay. "It doesn't really even save money. Seniors end up sicker and going to emergency rooms - the most expensive kind of care."

Medicare reimbursement is not the only issue that concerns doctors. Other health plans, such as Blue Cross and Blue Shield and Tri-Care, health coverage for the military, could follow Medicare's lead.

"Medicare is the gold standard," said Dr. Alan Mindlin, an Oakland County physician and president of the Michigan State Medical Society. "Other plans peg their payments on Medicare." Physicians' willingness to take poor patients and the elderly is wearing thin, said Dr. Prasad Kommareddi, president of the Genesee County Medical Society.

Private insurance makes up for money lost caring for patients on Medicaid, which pays only 37 cents on the dollar, but more and more patients are completely uninsured. And now come Medicare cutbacks.

"There's nowhere left to cut," Kommareddi said. "Doctors cannot sustain their practices this way."

The AMA has recommended an increase of 1.5 percent in doctor reimbursements, allowing the public to shop for its own health insurance and to receive tax credits to encourage saving to pay for health expenses.

Granholm Signs Bill to Help Constantine Attract New Jobs to Michigan

December 16, 2005

LANSING – Governor Jennifer M. Granholm has signed legislation that will give the village of Constantine the tools it needs to attract a new warehousing facility that could result in as many as 400 new jobs. The legislation is identical to a proposal she offered state lawmakers earlier this fall.

“We are fighting for every job in a global economy,” Granholm said. “But sometimes that fight can be as close to home as states like Indiana and Ohio that are also competing for jobs that we want to locate in Michigan. With a stroke of the pen, we are giving Constantine the opportunity to compete on a level playing field.”

Public Act 267 allows villages located within 15 miles of the state line to offer property tax abatements to warehousing facilities that are weighing whether to locate in Michigan or the bordering states of Indiana and Ohio. The special tax abatement could be offered until April 30, 2006.

“We want to target our economic development efforts in ways that will result in new jobs for Michigan,” Granholm said. “This legislation will pave the way for that to happen in Constantine.”

The law was given immediate effect.